

Campaigning grandmother wants councils to 'get round a map' with travellers

Looking for peace

SYLVIA Dunn is not your average grandmother. Sylvia was born into the traveller way of life and considers her nationality, gipsy.

She has just taken on the mantle of President of the National Gipsy and Travellers Affairs Group, fighting for the rights of the travelling community.

Three weeks ago Mrs Dunn and other members of the group joined a delegation that marched on Downing Street calling for local authorities to do more to provide gipsy sites.

She decided to take on her new role after being impressed by the aims and aspirations of the group, things she shares and believes in.

■ By ED BEAVAN

She said: "What we are trying to do is mediate with councils where there are threatened evictions in order to get land identified for gipsies to rent, buy or lease.

"I have seen a lot of trauma and stress caused by evictions."

Mrs Dunn, who refuses to give her age, has lived in her own mobile home on land in Goldsmith Drive, Rayleigh, for the past 14 years. Before that she spent 60 years on the road, and has fond memories of her childhood experience as a gipsy.

The mum-of-two said: "I was born in Hertfordshire and was one of nine children.

We lived on wagons which were pulled by horses, my father had 29 horses and worked with them.

"I don't remember any prejudice or unhappy times, nobody used to hassle us. The girls used to sleep on bunk beds on the wagon while the boys slept underneath it.

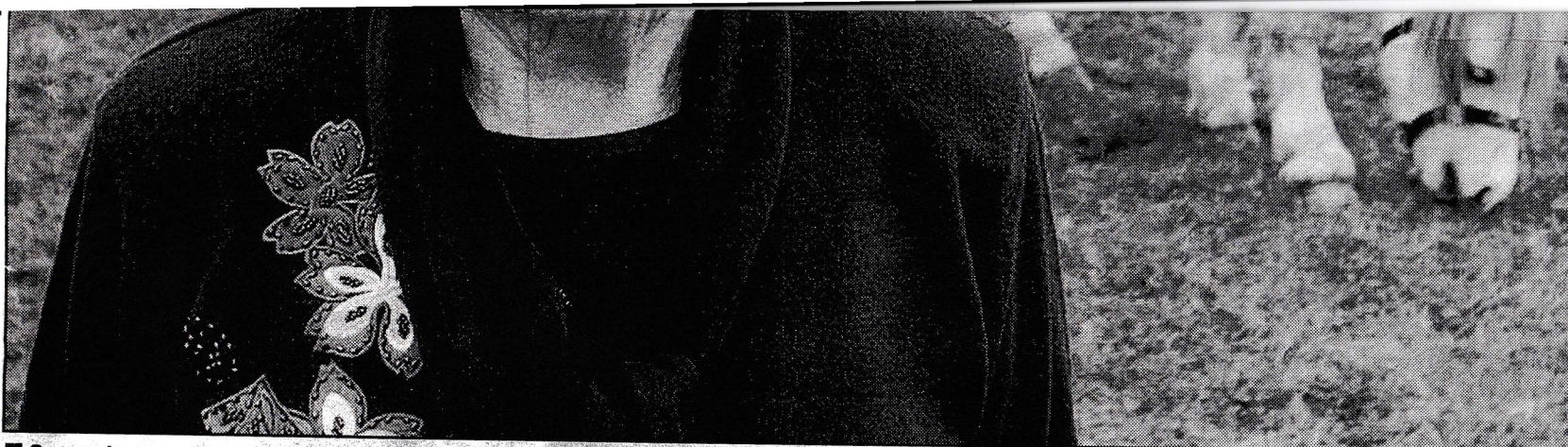
"We travelled as far north as Glasgow and Edinburgh and as far south as Southampton."

Mrs Dunn believes that attitudes towards gipsies have deteriorated significantly in her lifetime.

She said: "Things are a hundred times worse today, travellers are all tainted as being criminals. The minute our children are born they are considered criminals.

"People are now fearful of large groups of gipsies and feel threatened, but travellers need to stay in groups for their own protection."





■ Somewhere to live – Sylvia Dunn has seen the stress and trauma brought on by evictions

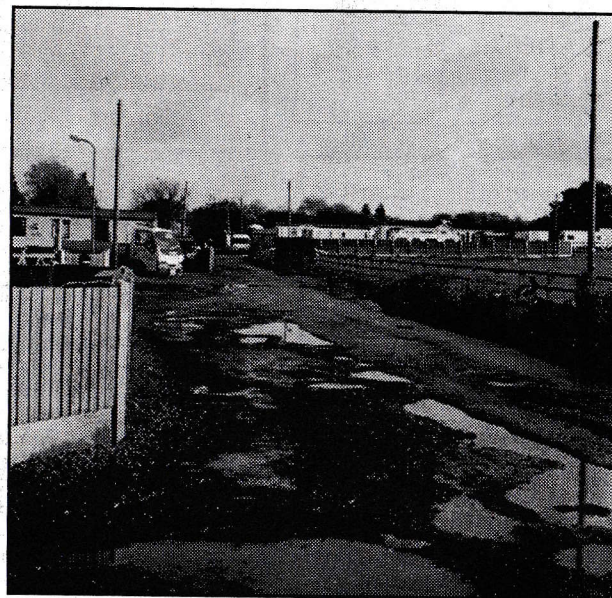
Picture: **ROBIN WOOSEY** 73KQB6



■ Crays Hill – the travellers' site at Oak Road



■ Downing Street – last month



■ Wickford – the Hovefields Avenue site

Talking about the travellers sites at Hovefields, in Wickford, and Crays Hill, which are made up of both legal and illegal plots, she said: "I'm not happy that its not their own land but they are not doing anything wrong."

"They are forced into the situation because the law is against them. Councils will not give gipsies planning permission when they apply for it."

"It took me six years to get my licence here in Rayleigh, so what else are our people to do?"

The nearby Crays Hill Primary School also hit the headlines recently, when all the non-traveller pupils left the school.

Mrs Dunn said. "I'm not happy this has happened and neither are the people there. But our children are entitled to an education just as much as other children, and have lost out because there has been so much prejudice."

Mrs Dunn called for the creation of official sites in the area for gipsies, and said: "There should definitely be more travellers' sites in south Essex, there's plenty of land they could use."

"Rochford Council was supposed to find some land a few years ago but they never did."

"We need to sit down with councillors with a map and identify possible locations."

Mrs Dunn is a member of the International Roma Women's Group at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

Mrs Dunn, who has one grandchild, hopes her hard work and campaigning will lead to a better future for the travelling community and help break down prejudices against them.

She said: "We are just people looking for peace and a place to live."